Biotechnology Facts

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Agricultural Biotechnology:
Safe, Effective and Unfairly Blocked By EU

EU Moratorium on Biotechnology Not Based on Science

Since the late 1990s, the EU has pursued policies that undermine the development and use of agricultural biotechnology.

Beginning in October 1998, five EU member states announced that they would block all further approvals of biotechnology products for an indefinite period of time, effectively resulting in an EU moratorium on all approvals of new varieties of biotech crops. Because new biotech varieties are continually introduced, and because crop varieties are commingled on export, the EU moratorium had the effect of barring many U.S. agricultural products, including most U.S. corn, from EU markets.

The EU moratorium was based on political concerns, and was not grounded on any health or safety risks related to biotechnology. To the contrary, there is no internationally recognized science that demonstrates any safety issues associated with the use and/or consumption of approved biotech products.

Under WTO rules, when WTO members establish approval processes, they take on obligations to operate those approval processes in a manner that is based on science and not subject to unnecessary delays.

The United States believes that the EU's biotech moratorium is unwarranted by valid scientific concerns and is plainly inconsistent with these fundamental WTO obligations.

For years, the United States refrained from bringing a WTO case to give the EU an opportunity to lift the moratorium, as the EU assured us it would. But the EU was not able to overcome its internal political pressures and lift the moratorium.

Finally, in August 2003, the United States – joined by Argentina and Canada – pursued dispute resolution before the WTO. The U.S. case has two principal elements:

(1). A challenged of the EU's moratorium on approving biotech varieties for sale or use in the EU; and

(2). A challenge of national bans of products the EU has already approved.

The WTO case alleges that the EU moratorium violates WTO rules by blocking U.S. exports without a valid scientific basis and imposes undue delay on approvals.

The United States believes it has shown that the EU moratorium is based on political expediency, rather than on health or safety concerns. Indeed, the EU's own scientific authorities consistently find biotech varieties to be safe. According to the EU's regulatory process, these varieties should have been approved for sale and use in the EU, but the EU has failed to approve them.

The United States and our partners took the case to ask that our farm products are given a fair, timely, rules-based scientific review.

Effects of the Moratorium Go Beyond Europe

- In addition to blocking U.S. grain exports to the EU, Europe's actions unfairly discriminate against safe and innovative products, and discourage further research and development in biotechnology.

- Biotechnology has the potential to help farmers meet challenges posed by harsh climates and disease. Virus-resistant potato and papaya varieties are already helping farmers achieve higher yields. Research continues on salt tolerant and drought resistant crops.

- Biotech crops with nutritional enhancements like golden rice may help provide the poor with healthy, more complete diets.

- But restrictions like those in the EU discourage investment in biotechnology, for fear that these products will not find markets that are open to them.

Biotech Crops are Safe

- Consumers in the United States have been safely consuming nutritious foods that contain biotech ingredients for a decade.

- The U.S. regulatory process ensures that all biotech products that are commercially grown, processed, sold and eaten are as safe for the environment and for human and animal health as their conventional counterparts.

- The UN Food and Agriculture Organization and WHO found that there were no greater risks associated with biotech than conventional plants and foods. Even the European Commission for Research has arrived at similar conclusions when comparing biotech to conventional food sources.

Biotech Crops Deliver Better Yields, Promote Development and Help the Environment

- Biotechnology is part of the long tradition of agricultural innovation and plant breeding to develop higher yielding, disease-resistant crops.

- Farmers worldwide have recognized the economic, agricultural and environmental benefits of biotech crops.

- Agricultural biotechnology is important to the United States and the world. It offers the potential to developing countries to meet their food security needs and to lift them from subsistence agriculture.

- Agricultural biotechnology also provides environmental benefits. Adoption of biotech varieties has significantly reduced insecticide and herbicide use, and has allowed many farmers to adopt "no till" farming practices, thereby reducing soil erosion and water use. Scientists continue to develop crops that resist drought and disease.

- Poor farmers in developing countries are growing more biotech crops every year. More than 8.25 million farmers around the globe use biotech seeds, and 90 percent are resource-poor farmers living in developing countries.

- The UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization both note biotech's value in creating sustainable development and providing reliable and safe food sources, especially for poor countries. Better yields generate better incomes – another benefit to the nearly 7.4 million poor farmers in developing countries who grow biotech crops.